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CADETS TO THE RESCUE

OR

FARADAY'S CORDON OF DEATH.

BY

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Cadets to the Rescue!

CHAPTER I.

"LOOKING FOR TROUBLE."

"Sir!"

"Well?"

"How dare you!"

"What's the trouble now?"

"Take your foot off my shoe!"

Clif Faraday, favorite, champion and hero of the Fourth Class, Annapolis Naval Academy, indulged in a slightly superior smile.

"Suppose," he suggested, in reply, gently, but very bluntly—"suppose that you remove your shoe from under my foot?"

"You stepped on it!"

"No; you got in my way."

Clif Faraday was simply calm and smiling, but there was a latent something under the surface of the serene face that made the braggart bully before him back water promptly.

Clif shrugged his shoulders as the fellow was silent.

His would-be enemy had been looking for trouble all the morning.

It was apparent to the entire cadet group—enjoying an outing along the banks of the beautiful Severn—that he had purposely stumbled into Clif's way to find an excuse for a quarrel.

He directed an angry and then a sheepish glance at the trim, straight adversary he dared not tackle.

"Bah!" he sneered, turning on his heel.

"The mutton-head!" remarked lank Fishcake.

"Just what that means—'Ba!' put in Nanny, the smallest student in the academy.

"Scrap?" eagerly interrogated Pun'kin, the fat, poetical plebe, rushing up hopefully at this juncture.

"Oh, no!" wagged Dismal Joy, solemnly. "Faraday never scraps."

"Don't?"

"No; when it's necessary he just hits out."

"That's so."

"Which ends it."

Clif had made no move towards ending anything, in the present instance.

From the way his quick hands got ready, however, and his eyes squared his opponent, every friendly soul divined that the latter had made discretion the better part of valor just in time.

The quarrelsome craven was a blot, a blur on a bright, peaceful scene, as he was a dampener on every occasion when the jolliest crowd in class or school broke loose from study and duty.

Chunky, swarthy, low-browed, fierce-eyed, slovenly, out with everything, himself included—this description covered him precisely.

"Who is he, anyway?" asked Vic Rollins, who, espying the incipient fracas from a distance, had hastened up without seeing the fellow's face.

"Darchie."

"Oh! a Third Class chap—what's he doing with our crowd?"

"No, a Fourth Class chap!" corrected Fishcake,

with a wriggle as if he was swallowing a dose of quinine.

"How's that?" pressed Vic, in wonder.

"Dropped—back in lessons, training, morals, ethics, and general trim, they say," pursued Fishcake.

"Yes, and Watson, head of the class, declares they feel as if they'd got rid of an incubator!" put in Trolley, the Jap.

"Incubus, Trolley," corrected Nanny. "No one liked him, I know. He's got more black marks, broken more rules, and cut up more mean tricks in a month than the average indifferent cadet would in two years."

"Shame they've landed him down on us!" murmured Pun'kin.

"He's found his level already," asserted Fishcake. "See there!"

The disgruntled fellow under discussion had just joined three others at a little distance.

"Friendly as all get out!" observed Nanny.

"Chawncey De Lawncey, McFattrick, and Kafooze-lum," murmured Fishcake, "and thick as bees!"

"A fitting quadrangle!" said Trolley.

"Quartette, you mean."

"They say he stands a good show of being dropped entirely from the rolls," encouraged Trolley.

Clif started up the stroll anew, the pilot of a group numbering a fair baker's dozen.

As he glanced over his shoulder he observed that the quartette was trailing on.

Heads together like four conspirators, their glances glum and menacing, they resembled some malignant

band bound to make it hot for somebody or other before the day was through.

A belated volunteer, two minutes later, Ridgely made the crowd in a beathless spurt.

"Why don't you run away from a fellow?" he gasped. "And say! Clif," he added, mysteriously—"what kind of persimmons have you been dealing out to that mob back there?"

"Oh, them!" muttered Vic, and explained the episode just concluded.

"Yes, Clif showed his teeth, and Darchie flunked—that's all!" said Nanny.

"It is not all, just the same!" dissented the last arrival, a little seriously. "Want to look out, Clif!"

"Why, what for?"

"I heard them talking as I passed. You know how Chawncey De Lawncey loves you! He has incited this squabble. Afraid of you himself, and thinking poison, he's using Darchie as a catspaw."

"I shall not disappoint any of them in what they may think best to come for," announced Clif, indifferently. "I hardly imagine they will trouble me, though."

"No, for here they are, hustling up to join us," spoke Joy.

The four joined the others just there, easy and smiling as if no cross-tide had ruffled the serenity of the hour.

Unfortunate Chawncey De Lawncey stumbled into evidence with one of his usual fool breaks, and this started the ball rolling.

Chawncey could never refrain from playing the

highly-English act—having spent a year in "Lunnon."

He was describing a ship he had seen, "with a bow at both ends," that was to make a polar trip.

"Bow at both ends—expressive nautical verbiage!" gloated Nanny. "Oh, Chawnce—you are so quaint!"

"Yes, the *hull* thing, you know," geyed Fishcake.

"What do you call it, then?" flustered Chawncey. "It's going to the far nawth——"

"Why don't they go north?" questioned Pun'kin, with great interest manifested.

"I said nawth!" repeated Chawncey, testily. "Think of it!—icebergs and icefloes!"

"Wouldn't it frost you, now!" criticized Joy.

"Beastly enough, the hard wintahs here, don't you know!" shivered Chawncey. "I believe I feel the coming one in my bones already."

"Really, Chawnce," said Nanny, in innocent surprise. "I wasn't aware you were a believer in the goose-bone theory."

"It's a horrid climate all over the United States, you know," complained Chawncey. "Why, when I was in Paray we used to go regularly—myself and a couple of fellows, sons of a French count—and swim across the Seine three times before breakfast every morning."

Pun'kin let out a hysterical choke.

"Why do you smile?" deanded Chawncey, severely. "I was simply citing the difference in climate. I should be glad to share your amusement."

"Why, Chawnce!" grinned the fat plebe—"I was

thinking that you left your clothes at the wrong end of the swim!"

Chawncey fell back with a dignified snuffle. Everybody was on a broad grin except himself and his cohorts.

Clif turned about to smooth the troubled harmonies, when a spirited shout diverted all minds.

"Let me!" rang out from Fishcake.

He halted the crowd by waving them back with his long, sprawling arms.

Ahead the river path lined a fence, and upon the bottom rail of this there stuck up a shoe.

The sole faced, and it seemed at that distance as if the shoe had been balanced there purposely set, an inviting target for the idle or skilful.

All hands saw Fishcake's purpose. As he stooped and possessed himself of a stone, half a dozen dove for a like missile.

"See me spot it dead-centre!" boasted Fishcake, who was quite an expert in this line.

"Send 'er a-kiting!" piped Pun'kin.

Whiz-pop! pop!

"Say!" flared Nanny, staring.

Three well-directed shots had taken the temptingly presented shoe with tanging, resounding force.

The shoe did not "go a-kiting," however, as anticipated.

Instead, it was raised up quickly.

"The shoe"—blurted Pun'kin, noting a vast animation among the shrubbery half concealing the fence.

"Has a man at the end of it!" completed Nanny, quickly. "Fellows—put!"

CHAPTER II.

HARD TO BEAT.

The shoe, as Nanny had amazedly exclaimed, had a man at the end of it, and the man now rose up.

A leery character he must have been for he started into action in a way both repellant and tragic.

"Got a gun!" warned Pun'kin, putting for the brush.

"And is shooting," echoed Fishcake, loping for a tree.

"Stop!" ordered Clif, in a quick, ringing shout.

Over the top rail, as he sprang to his feet with a startled cry, the man shot his arm, a revolver grasped in his hand.

Crack!—crack! there was a terrific scurry.

Crack!—six shots pinged the air, with scarcely a lapse between the reports.

"You scoundrel or madman!" remonstrated Clif, hotly.

A yell behind and then a grab behind interrupted Clif.

Every chamber of the revolver had been fired, and it was a marvel that more than one victim had not been bored.

Clif had stood his ground from sheer fearlessness and astonishment.

Now he started a spring, to reach the culpable shooter and teach him what was what for risking half a dozen lives.

Clif turned involuntarily at the scream at his ear, however—Chawncey De Lawncey had uttered it.

Every other member of the group had vanished—rocks, trees, shrubbery hid them.

Chawncey had started to run—a vine had tripped him.

Wriggling up to Clif now, he seized him frantically by the waist, lifting himself by the clutch.

Using him as a shield, keeping him face-front, burrowing his head into his back blindly, Chawncey howled and writhed.

“Let go!” cried Clif.

“He’ll shoot! Save me—I am not well!” quavered Chawncey, his teeth rattling.

Clif gave a great jerk. He nearly tore the coat off his back, but Chawncey held on like grim death.

The fellow at the fence was well supplied with weapons—his second revolver was now in play.

“Stop!” repeated Clif, in thunder tones.

“Get back! keep back—you can’t come at me!” the man cried, furiously.

Clif winced as a bullet seared the back of one hand—Chawncey was having forty fits a minute.

As the stranger’s tones rang out some one in the hiding crowd seemed to recognize them.

From the midst of the refugees there sounded a startled, sudden:

“Drop it—only cadets!”

Instantly the firing ceased—immediately, too, as by magic, the shooter vanished.

Clif traced the connection between the two shouts.

He had pressing business on hand. He was determined to call this indiscriminate pistol-wielder to account.

“Let go!” he cried, whirling Chawncey around

like a clinging cat as the only way to disengage his frenzied grasp.

Chawncey took a fling and came down with a groan. Clif sprang at the fence, over it.

But Clif did not even get a glimpse of the fugitive. Breathless, suspicious, the cadet came back to the late point of scurry to find some white, scared faces, and many excited and angry ones.

Their owners were discussing the startling episode volubly.

"Who was he?" "What did he shoot for?" "Where had he gone?" Clif brushed aside idle surmises and curiosity in his forceful, characteristic way.

"All hands, attention!" he said, with sharp seriousness, determined to strike at the root of the matter.

When Clif commanded all obeyed—the battery of eyes was fixed in impressive silence upon him.

"Who shouted, 'Drop it—only cadets?'" demanded Clif, his probing glance running the faces about him.

"Not I!"

"Nor I!"

Negative shakes answered generally—Clif's brow drew down.

"Somebody did!" he asservated, sternly.

"Say!" spoke Fishcake, walking over to where Darchie stood, and placing a hand on his shoulder—"you did."

"What—what! Me?" stammered Darchie, his glance shifting uneasily.

"Yes—you."

Clif advanced a step or two.

"Did you hear him, Fishcake?" he inquired.

"Of course I did!"

"Suppose he did?" broke in Darchie, flushing and bridling up—"suppose he did?"

"Why, then," pronounced Clif, incisively, "an explanation is due."

"Is it?" sneered Darchie.

"And you are going to give one."

"Am I?" continued the same defiant tones.

"Yes, you are. See here, fellows—that came near being a pretty deadly peppering for us."

"You bet—forty-two calibre! Look here!" interrupted Joy, holding up a bullet that had flattened itself against a rock.

"By mere chance nine shots missed us," continued Clif. "We don't know who fired them, but we have a right to know."

"Yes! yes!"

"And the person who shouted out those words, 'Drop it—only cadets,' must know. He recognized the shooter by his voice, and his answering direction was obeyed like magic."

"You have got to tell!" pressed Vic Rollins, severely.

"Huh! Crazy?" jeered Darchie. "Of course I hollered 'Drop it!' of course I yelled 'cadets!' If you'd had the wit to have done it before you'd have saved all this row—you'd scared the fellow—that's how it was."

"What! you don't know who the shooter was?" demanded Pun'kin, in frank, innocent credulity.

"Of course I don't!" insisted Darchie, with un-called-for emphasis.

Clif shrugged his shoulders. In his own mind he settled it that Darchie was lying.

In his own mind, too, he was satisfied that the stranger was some person of criminal instincts who, hastily aroused from sleep, had supposed he was scaring off and frightening away officers of the law or enemies who sought to do him some injury.

Darchie, however, from being defiant and rattled, had become sullen and obstinate.

"Like to make me out in cahoots with somebody to murder the kit—wouldn't you?" he glowered at Clif.

"You knew that man!" simply retorted Clif.

"Think so, if you like!"

"And I am going to find out who he is before I am much older," continued Clif.

There were "all kinds" at Annapolis Naval Academy, as there are in every community, young or old.

Darchie was of the kind that did not take "on sight" with the large majority of hearty, honest, ambitious cadets, who some day expected to "run the navy."

He had been sent by friends to the institution to see if it would not "sober him down," and he might far better have been shut up in some correctionary institution.

He had brought a good many vices along with him—these had soon disgusted his fellows.

His surreptitious outside escapades prevented his paying any attention to his studies, and he had now been degraded in ranking position.

Clif had caught rumors of positive dishonesty, of gambling, of drinking, on Darchie's part.

During the past week he and Chawucey De Lawncey had been "thick as bees"—as Fishcake had expressed it.

They had "gone off on a lark" only the night before, and upon the return of the superintendent—who was away in Washington for a day or two—it was hinted that the two delinquents would be seen walking a very straight and a very long chalk line.

Darchie left the crowd with a savage hang-dog glare in his eyes.

Clif, watching, fancied from the way he separated with Chawucey and his crowd that there was some sinister, secret understanding among them concerning the unknown shooter.

He felt that he would have his trouble for his pains, but he performed a simple duty in hailing Chawucey a few minutes later.

"Confidentially, De Lawncey," he said, for Chawucey's ear alone, "I advise you to steer clear of that fellow."

"Do—thanks!" drawled Chawucey insolently.

"He knows the man we accidentally roused up. If you know him also you must be aware that he is a reckless sneak from the way he acts."

"All kinds of people in the world, you know, Faraday!" was the reply, delivered with sapient smartness.

"Yes, and this fellow is undoubtedly one of the class glad of an opportunity to rope in the inexperienced—some loafer, dazzling Darchie with sharp gambling tricks and the like, I imagine."

From a slight quiver in Chawucey's eyes Clif suspected that he had hit the nail on the head.

"So, look out!" he spoke in final warning.

"Say, Faraday!" drawled Chawucey—"you don't like me."

"I would like you better if you tried not to think that."

"And, naturally, you don't like my friends."

"That fellow is not a friend."

"Attend to your own affairs. I happen to have had a cosmopolitan experience that will carry me through, I fancy, you know!" smirked Chawncsey, trying to look lofty, and turned on his heel.

There was an hour of rambling and roughing it—it would be a pretty old and a pretty crabbed mortal who could not find variety and pleasure in among that animated crowd.

At its end Clif found himself alone. He had purposely detached himself from the others.

They had returned in the direction of the academy. Clif walked along, keeping a sharp lookout.

Suddenly he gave a forward spurt. It was where the banks, one mass of luxuriant verdure, arose some fifteen feet from the river line.

Clif had observed, proceeding along the narrow path abutting, two persons.

"One is Darchie," he told himself, eagerly. "The other——"

In his precipitancy to get nearer, to overtake, Clif made a misstep, took a stumble.

To save a fall he grabbed at a dead bush, and in swaying to his balance again his sturdy pulling made the dry branches snap like firecrackers.

The noise had disturbed the two persons he had noticed.

There was only one now in sight—Darchie—and, faced directly about, his eyes were fixed palpably on Clif.

"I would wager something that the other fellow was the shooter!" murmured Clif. "Where can he have gone to? Jumped for covert mighty sprightly somewhere near, for my eyes were not off him ten seconds."

Clif made a bold front and walked straight on and

up to Darchie. The latter pressed back into a sort of gap to let Clif pass.

"Alone?" insinuated Clif, halting squarely in front of him.

"Of course I'm alone," answered Darchie, in a blustering tone.

"I fancied I saw somebody with you?" continued Clif.

"Did you? I can't help what you think!"

"Nor care?" argued Clif, pointedly.

"No, nor care! Go on. What are you bothering me for? I want no truck with you!"

If Darchie had not looked so wrought up, if his eyes had not snapped every time he caught a sound, as if fearing something he dreaded would happen, Clif might have passed on.

He fancied that Darchie was posed as he was for a purpose.

"I say," he observed, smoothly, "what's behind you there?"

"What's behind me!" exclaimed Darchie, with a start—"trees, bushes, of course."

"And—a break—a secret path below? I thought so!"

Clif had caught out at Darchie and half moved him.

Back like a sentinel Darchie sprang, his breath coming quickly.

"You pass on, Faraday!" he quavered, trembling with agitation.

"Not till I explore that secret path."

"There is no secret path!"

"What are you guarding, then?"

"Nothing."

"I know better. I am a curious fellow, Darchie—like to know all the handy dips of the river shore. I am going to explore this break, through which some one seems just to have passed."

"Say, Faraday! you are not!"

"Oh, yes, I am!"

Up came Darchie's fists, and his eyes blazed fire.

"Ah! worth defending, is it?" insinuated Clif.

"Then there must be something worth your extraordinary solicitude. Stand aside—I am a determined fellow, too, and I have taken a fancy to see where a dive through this particular nest of shrubbery will land me."

"You can't do it!"

"But I must!"

Darchie's face was white with emotion.

Clif took a step forward. Darchie suddenly threw off his coat.

He was no pigmy, and his arms and shoulders were strong and heavy-set like those of some embryo giant.

"You sha'n't go that way!" he declared, doubling up his fists again.

"Must!" observed Clif, sententiously.

"Then you must fight for it!"

CHAPTER III.

THE RIVER HIDE-OUT.

Darchie had planted himself like a rock. Clif saw that he was no light-weight, to be swept from one's path like a straw.

The challenge was direct: "Pass on or fight!" and under other circumstances Clif would have felt that he had no right to pursue Darchie's secret, whatever it might be.

"One word," he began.

"Put up or shut up!" flared Darchie.

"I don't want to hurt you——"

"Humph! your crowd isn't backing you this time!"

"You consider it fair if I down you?"

"Try and do it!"

Clif started toward his adversary, repeating his positive determination to descend to the river by way of the strangely guarded path.

Darchie said something, but not to Clif—a mere vague word, jerked out breathlessly.

Clif took it to be a hint, a direction of warning, to some one not visible but within earshot.

“Now, then, Darchie!”

“Once I grip you——”

“Take your medicine!”

“Uh!”

“Pshaw!”

The elaborate posing for the fight had come to nothing—the conflict began, ended, in a twinkling.

The path was narrow, as has been said, and, both knew, was no fit spot for wrestling.

Darchie tried a trick. He feigned to defend, suddenly bent forward, and whirled, intent on tipping Clif backwards down into the dip lining the path inshore.

Clif caught on just in time. He dodged the hurl of the ponderous body by the merest graze. The biter bit, the snarer trapped, meeting no resistance as calculated, Darchie kept on going.

He took a plunge that was fairly terrific, streaking a line flat and bare of grass and bushes clear to the bottom of the dip.

The top of his head met an obstacle in the shape of a big log, with a fearful crack. He did not even groan, as he flopped over sideways and lay quivering.

Clif was down beside him in an instant—Darchie was stiff and senseless.

Cliff whipped out Darchie's handkerchief from his pocket, wetted it in a puddle of water right at hand, and placed it over his forehead.

“He will be up on his pegs soon, and mad in the bargain,” soliloquized Clif. “No need of wasting sympathy here. Now for the secret path!”

There was no secret path, strictly speaking, but, as Clif had observed, a distant break in the bushes.

A human form had forced a way through the place that Darchie had so strenuously guarded—more than once, too, it was evident.

Clif squeezed past the bent and broken twigs, and continued to descend with footholds afforded by roots, stones, and in two places pegs driven into the soil.

He landed on the river level, but not on the exposed shore.

A half-fallen tree extended out into the stream.

It was still abloom, and vines grew so thickly over it that it presented a most effective curtain-screen.

"A regular hide-out," murmured Clif. "A raft? a box? but—no man!"

The sandy shelf ran down into the water. Half-drawn up on dry ground was a small raft.

Upon this rested a large tool box, long enough to contain a six-foot post auger, broad enough to hold the widest shaving plane, lying flat.

It was closed, but not locked. The hasp strap dangled uncaught.

Clif sat down on its top and glanced keenly about, taken fully as much by the strange presentment of a raft and a box in hiding, as by curiosity as to the whereabouts of the man he had recently seen with Darchie.

Clif drummed one set of fingers thoughtfully, unconsciously, on the top of the tool box.

Slip-slap!

The double sound unmistakably directed Clif's eyes—right down beside his hand on the top of the box.

There a panel about four inches wide and a foot long had shot back.

In profound amazement Clif noticed beyond it half a human face—eager, peering.

"Say, Darchie!" was spoken—excitedly, rapidly. "Oh!"

Slip—slap!

The panel slid back to its original position.

In marveling wonder Clif stared—a queer thrill traversed his frame.

“Whew!” he whistled—“that was a startler!”

Then he rocked—a sturdy pair of arms, an arched back, was striving to lift the corner and throw it off.

He maintained his position, and as the cover flapped back after pushing up, slipped the iron strap over the hasp and the box was locked.

Clif got off the box now. He reached for a dangling branch, broke off its end, slipped it through the staple.

“Now to guess out things!” he murmured, surveying the box as an enthusiast would some fascinating puzzle.

Clif did not have to cogitate very profoundly.

The occupant of the box was, in all probability, the recent companion of Darchie, and therefore the warned shooter of the rail fence.

What interested Clif was his queer environment—a hiding for keeps!

When the panel shot back, the man concealed within had mistaken Clif's rustling descent and his distracted tapping on the box for signs of the arrival of his friend Darchie.

“As pretty a mystery,” declared Clif, after standing in spell-bound survey of box and situation for a minute or two—“as pretty a layout as one would stumble across in a year's travel! What shall I do?”

He rapped on the box vigorously.

“Inside, there—a brief attention!” he called out.

There was only a rustle. Then Clif tapped on the panel till it rattled and shook, but no response was vouchsafed.

Clif viewed raft and load speculatively.

“The crowd is of course out of hail—back at the academy by this time,” he murmured. “Wish they weren't! this would interest them. Darchie is due at

any moment. 'The fellow inside there is minded to play the woodchuck act. I am so sure that he is the person who shot at us—a fellow afraid of daylight for some desperate reason—is up to some wickedness that Darchie, and perhaps De Lawncey and his crowd, are drifting into, that I shall take a little trouble to put him through a course of sprouts before I let him go!'

Clif gave the raft a light touch with his foot—it swaved and swung. He looked among the driftwood lining the sand.

Soon he had selected a long, bare limb that would answer for a pole.

Clif gave the raft a more vigorous push—it floated free of shore contact readily.

He sprang to it in such a way as to preserve a fair balance, for the raft was a poorly and hastily constructed kind of float.

It required a little engineering to find and navigate a break past the drooping tree branches. Then the raft floated buoyantly out into midstream.

"Hi-oh, you! oh, you!"

Clif looked up, waved his hand, smiled serenely and resumed poling.

Bareheaded, red as a peony, dancing madly from one foot to the other, was Darchie, twenty feet up on the bank.

Slip—slap!

For the third time the panel in the box took a slide—to the aperture pressed a colorless face, beaded with the perspiration of intense fright.

"Afloat!" gasped its owner—"say, don't!"

"Got to!" retorted Clif Faraday, resolutely.

CHAPTER IV.

A BRIEF CRUISE.

Clif had got the raft out into the swift, central current of the river, and it began to float rapidly downstream.

For a hundred paces Darchie could keep pace with it.

Two turns in the river course made Clif presumably safe, the pursuer distanced.

He managed to run the crazily-acting float across stream and he felt his point gained as he worked it in and out among a score of little islands.

Where the trees of two nearly touched, affording a kind of arcade, Clif beached the raft and esteemed all things secure.

There was not much possibility of Darchie getting track of him—he would probably not guess at all that Clif had put across the river.

Clif now had things his own way. He decided to move with circumspection and leisure.

Tapping smartly on the movable panel, he challenged his captive.

"Come to time!" he hailed. "I must talk with you."

There was no response. In disgusted imprisonment, the boxed-up refugee evidently preferred silence.

Clif got out his knife, picked up a stone. He drove the blade into the wood and began to pound. This soon sent the panel flying back.

Hovering near to it was the face of the prisoner, but not wholly exposed now.

Clif had not caught a fair glance of its lineaments up to date, nor was such vouchsafed at present.

The captive had wrapped a handkerchief over the lower part of his features, and only the startled, excitement-haunted eyes showed.

"On the hide, aren't you?" observed Clif. "You ought to wear an iron mask!"

"What—what are you going to do with me?" panted the man.

"First, find out who you are and what you are up to," responded Clif, decisively.

"I don't see how you are interested?"

"Don't you? When a man fires on a crowd of cadets without provocation——"

"Look here!" interrupted the captive fervently—"that was all a mistake."

"A pretty costly one for you, if you had happened to hit anybody!"

"But I didn't—and I wouldn't for the world!" declared the man, earnestly. "I was roused up in sleep—startled, confused."

"And—scared?" insinuated Clif.

"That's it! Wouldn't you be?—fast asleep, stones pelting like hail?"

"If I had a guilty conscience, yes."

"Why——"

"Which you seem to have," proceeded Clif, bluntly. "Let that pass—nervous impulse. But how about jumping to shelter, hiding in this box, the minute you saw me?"

"Why, why," stammered the captive. "I was afraid you would call me to account for that shooting, of course!" blurted the fellow, brightening up as he caught at the plausible excuse.

"Then how came this box planted right at your elbow to hide you?"

"Just happened."

"What—spot, burrow, lock, panel, all understood by you in an instant—come, now!"

The man was silent.

"Truth is," pursued Clif, "you are afraid of something. What I am interested in, though, is how it comes about you are so thick with the cadet Darchie."

"Who?" bluffed the man.

"That's enough!" spoke Clif, sharply—"you won't tell the truth? I must find it out for myself."

Clif knocked the locking apparatus free. He was bound to see his captive full-length.

He seized the strap and pulled—the box cover never budged.

"Oh!" he said; "got a bolt on the inside, eh? You understand the mechanism of this mummy case particularly well for a fellow 'just happening on it,' don't you, now! Listen to me—out you come!"

"Never!" asserted a muffled response, and the panel shot shut and a click under told that it, too, was bolted.

There were little holes bored in one end of the box, so Clif discerned that the captive could get air.

He sat watching the panel and reflecting for nearly five minutes, during which time there was not so much as a rustle underneath.

Clif finally gave another sharp admonishing rap to enforce attention.

"Listen," he said, "I can crush in the top of this box with a big rock—I can start adrift again and float you down to where a crowd will want to know what's what, instead of myself alone."

The panel shot back.

"Say!" came up through it in pleading tones—"don't do it!"

"What do you expect me to do?"

"Let me alone—go away. I'm no concern of yours."

"Somehow I can't help but think that you are!"

"You are greatly mistaken," asserted the captive, with great emphasis. "We all have our troubles and secrets. Respect mine."

"No!" said Clif, resolutely—"something is wrong about this combination—I have decided. We get afloat once more."

"Take that, and change your mind!"

A fist came up through the panel slot—it clenched a mixed mass of bank notes.

“Money, eh?” insinuated Clif.

“And more, if you say it!” pressed the fellow, eagerly. “Take it, have a good time; say nothing. Forget all about me.”

“In other words, a bribe?”

“No—a present.”

“Same thing,” declared Clif, shortly—“a gift from a stranger, a bribe from a suspect, would not fit my code of morals at all!”

“Then take that!”

“That’s better!”

Bang!

“For it shows your true metal—and now, where are you!”

They called Clif “chain-lightning quickness” up at the academy, and he preserved his record in the present instance.

A click warned him that for the bank notes a revolver was substituted, and presented, so that Clif had opportunity to act.

Squarely toward him the weapon flared—once, twice—but it missed both times, for Clif had dodged, dropped.

Then, the powder blacking his hands as a third report rang out, Clif got a grasp on the revolver, wrenched it free, and gave the retiring knuckles a good sharp rap with it.

He slipped the weapon into his pocket with a grim face, and immediately set at work to get the raft afloat again.

Clif hurried his movements as some peculiar whistles cut the air at a distance across stream, he fancied.

Clif had his idea—to proceed down a feeder running almost parallel with the main stream for a mile or more.

In doing this Clif calculated that Darchie and his

friends would be completely hoodwinked—engage in a blind search—while he outdistanced and outwitted them.

Clif had reckoned without his host, however.

There was a low wagon bridge to pass--Clif would have to duck his head to go under.

He did this, but tempted to look up again, for he was sure that some one was lying flat on the bridge.

It was a drunken or an injured person, he fancied, as he glided under the planking.

An extremely lively person, and more than one, Clif guessed, as he passed the centre of the bridge.

There the light flooded down through an aperture caused by the removal of two planks.

Over it peered two excited faces, and two pairs of swift arms shot down, grabbing, and then gripping.

"McFatricks!" breathed Clif—"Darchie!"

Each had seized an arm near the shoulder—both held on like wildcats.

"Got him?" quavered an excited tone.

"Got him!" declared a chuckling, satisfied voice. Clif struggled, might and main.

Pole and all, he was lifted into nothingness, and the raft melted away from under his feet.

CHAPTER V.

AT BAY.

"Pull him up!" cried Darchie, struggling mightily.

"Help me lift!" panted McFatricks. "By the blood of Bruce! he's heavy as lead."

"And slippery as an eel," voiced Darchie, excitedly; "but up he comes!"

"Not in forty years!" said Clif Faraday.

The nervy naval cadet was in quite a desperate situation, but he felt nettled rather than scared.

He could divine now how the directing pistol shots had guided the enemy.

The bridge planks removed, they had lain in wait for him, and now they had him.

Or fancied they had. Clif instantly put up a fight. They had his arms firmly secured—one at each—but Clif's feet were free.

As Darchie lifted and McFattrick pulled, Clif spread these out so as to lock into two of the supporting braces under the planking.

"Pull!" he derided.

"Something's got to give!" puffed Darchie.

"It won't be me!"

"Hold on!" suddenly shouted McFattrick.

"Stop—you idiot! Don't let go!" raved Darchie.

With a vacant stare over his shoulder, however, McFattrick deliberately allowed Clif's arm to slip through his hands.

"Let go, too!" he vociferated. "Look yonder! How's that?"

"Deuce take it!" suddenly uttered Darchie, in a wild bellow.

Splash!

Clif was dropped.

Shaking the water from eyes and face, he peered sharply as he came to the surface after a douse.

His quick glance was directed down-stream, for along the shore his two recent captors were running.

Clif saw what they saw, and struck out on a swift swim.

The raft, when he was so summarily and unexpectedly lifted from it—had tipped—the box overweighting it.

This had slipped off—side by side raft and box now floated twenty feet distant, but only because a lot of driftwood held both back.

This crevasse the pressing weight was slowly moving, and Clif saw that in a few seconds it must weaken and give way.

He reached the raft and clambered up on it just as the obstruction parted.

Throwing himself flat, he got a grip on the dangling, swinging strap of the box-fastening.

His thoughts ran like lightning. To drag or draw the box back on the raft without tipping was folly.

He was determined not to give up the man he had stuck to through the thick and thin of a varied eventful cruise.

There was no doubt afforded now of the close connection of Darchie with the boxed-up man, and of De Lawncey and his crowd with Darchie, for Chawncey himself and Kafoozelum were to be seen headed on a run for their companions who had just released Clif at the bridge.

Clif swung into the water and tried to give the box a side-header shorewards.

Once beached, he would defend it even if it was four against one!

Two more pushes and he was wading. Then it was no trick at all to send it grating on the gravelly shore slant.

Clif sprang, dripping, to where its end anchored. Darchie in the lead, the quartette he had to fear, came plunging toward the spot.

Clif set his lips firmly and fixed an uncompromising eye on the pilot of the belligerent group.

This did not suffice—Darchie's blood was roused, and he rolled up his wrist-bands as he ran, while encouraging his comrades.

"Follow!" he blared.

"And stick!" chorused McPatrick—"we may as well have it out with Faraday for keeps this time!"

"Seeing he's alone," suggested Chawncey.

"He ain't!" shouted Kafoozelum, suddenly and shrilly, and changed his course, diving affrighted and headlong for a convenient bush.

"Eh?" projected Chawncey.

"No—he's got a friend."

"A friend?"

"Yes, this—halt there, Darchie!" spoke Clif Faraday, firmly.

He had whipped out the revolver he had wrested from the hand of the man inside the box, and business and not braggadocia was suggested by the way he held it ready for service.

In dismay Chawncey and McFatricks halted.

Darchie stopped, too, but with clenched fists, hissing breath, and sullenly wrathful eyes.

"This box," said Clif, evenly, backing to its head and giving it an explanatory heel kick, "goes to the academy."

"It don't!" burst out Darchie.

"For examination."

"Faraday—you'll never!" choked up Darchie.

"See if I don't! Not a step nearer. Do you fellows think you are in some Klondike camp, or in Cuba? You, De Lawncey!" called out Clif, sharply—"you may not realize it, but you are mixing up in a pretty black piece of business, if I know anything about it."

"He don't know!" almost foamed Darchie, beside himself with baffled rage and hatred. "You sneaks!" he flared. "You idiots! are you going to flunk? Faraday, you meddler! mind your own business. Faraday, don't you appoint yourself dictator over my affairs! By ginger! I'll——"

"Smawsh me!" marveled Chawncey De Lawncey the next minute.

It was Darchie who was "smawshed," however—and badly.

Ungovernable rage had nerved up this venturesome person to make a reckless dash at Clif.

When he saw Darchie coming at him, Clif prepared to deal a knockout blow.

It might hurt, but it might harm far worse to lose control of an underhanded mystery that promised to threaten academy welfare.

"Don't come again!" was what Clif said.

There was a crack directly on Darchie's great massive jaw. It was well that it was of that description, or the blow would have broken it.

Darchie let out a frightful shriek of pain. He was tiger enough to resume the attack now madly aroused, but sheer helplessness deterred.

He sat, where he landed like a clod, about ten feet away from Clif, swaying and gulping, digging with his finger nails to detach a dirt-crust rock from the earth to use as a missile.

Chawncey, with infinite respect for "that Faraday!" had edged behind a tree.

Kafoozelum, fully screened by the bush, peered through the leaves with the terror of a timid spectator taking in a calamity.

McFatricks minded not that he had slid into six inches of water in seeking the screen of a protruding rock.

"Now, go away," ordered Clif, sternly. "I don't know who your friend in this box may be, but I am determined to find out."

"It's—it's destruction, then!" bawled Darchie, with a frantic stare.

"You must be in a pretty bad fix, Darchie?" suggested Clif.

"Fellows—you, De Lawncey!" raved Darchie, "are we going to let Faraday boss us like babies!"

"I—I'd rawther not interfere, you know!" bleated the awed exquisite.

"Then you give up——"

"Shut up!" came from the skulking McFatricks. "Faraday's got the puzzle—don't give him the key!"

"He's got—no he hasn't! he shan't have!" almost shrieked Darchie. "Oh, you cowards! I guess you don't realize the row you'll be in if we let Faraday beat us!"

With considerable of an effort Darchie got to his feet.

Rallying from the staggering blow Clif had dealt

him, best as he could, Darchie plunged behind the rock sheltering McPatrick.

Clif glanced down the shore. There was a house within earshot, though out of sight, a couple of yards beyond the first clump of trees.

He could not drag the box on land, however, and he would not leave it alone, even for sixty seconds, for worlds.

It might be floated again, but Clif somewhat ominously regarded the silence of its occupant.

Had enough water leaked in to overcome Darchie's mysterious friend?

This must be true, for the hasp strap dangled loose, and by unbolting inside the man could readily have come out long since, had he so desired or been able.

To vigilance over the slightest movement of his adversaries, therefore, there was now added solicitude for his strangely passive captive, on the part of Clif.

Keeping an eye out and the revolver still leveled, Clif half stooped and seized the projecting cover with one hand.

It lifted readily.

"Unbolted!" soliloquized Clif, a little surprised.

"Bolted!" he added, with far more force and astonishment.

Clif threw back the cover and took a long, incredulous stare into the box.

It was empty—in some mysterious way its late inmate had escaped.

Clif marveled, but at the same time a myriad host of new suggestions presented like magic.

"The fellow got out when the raft tipped and none of us noticed," instantly surmised the cadet.

"Made himself scarce and safe promptly," reasoned Clif. "The others don't suspicion it."

To keep them deluded was now his purpose—he

could scarcely hope to re-secure the escaped captive except through them.

Clif groped mentally for some bold and clever plan whereby he could gain a point by utilizing his superior knowledge of the real state of facts.

About to release the cover of the box, in stead, he watched in turn Chawncey and Kafoozelum dart behind the same rock that sheltered Darchie and Mc-Fatrick.

Subdued, though excited, ejaculations preceded and accompanied the dash and greeting of the four reunited.

Mysterious whisperings haunted the air in a sinister way.

Then suddenly a voice not at all juvenile sounded sharply:

"All at once!"

"But he's armed?"

"P'st!"

"Well, this is serious!" ejaculated Clif.

A volley of stones came from behind the rocks—Clif jumped in to the box.

He guessed the source of the directing voice.

The man who had escaped from the box had arrived on the scene from the river—had just joined his friends.

Clif held the box cover breast-high—a sort of shield—and there rattled against it as across a battlement a second shower of stones.

"Two-pounders!" he remarked. "Getting savage, but—look out!"

Clif took aim with his pistol at a foot uncautiously extending past the shelter of the rock—he hoped it belonged to the recent inmate of the box.

Click—snap! three times went the revolver, that only.

"Oho!" derided a mocking voice.

The truth dawned on Clif—he might have reckoned it out before.

The chambers were empty.

Clif now as nimbly leaped out of the box as had he sprang into it.

It was a bold rush right in among his foes, or a dash to the near farmhouse and a call for volunteers.

Yet undecided, Clif was caught midway in his spring with a fusilade that showed his enemies determined to get him under.

As many as four missiles struck him. One came with crashing force—a boulder big as a cocoa nut.

“Now, then, this is my deal!” rang out the savage voice of the fellow whom Clif had captured in the river hide-out.

With the utterance, all the sounds of nature echoing about—the splashing river, the fluttering trees, the warbling birds—dulled down into one hollow, roaring hum, and Clif knew no more.

The naval cadet came back to sensibility with a pained idea of helplessness.

He did not know where he was, but he guessed that hours must have passed since he last had closed his eyes on the world.

Clif lay on a pile of straw in the corner of an old dilapidated building resembling a barn.

This corner was partially stalled off, but he could see through a break in a board—a light attracting his attention.

Out through a doorway he could also see a brief slant ending at water, so he guessed that the dilapidated structure, whatever it was, must be located on the banks of the river.

“Dark,” murmured Clif. “A lantern. Two persons—yes, the one is Darchie. The other must be the man who escaped from the tool-box.”

The tool-box!

Clif stared. He even tried to get up. Then he made a new dismaying discovery.

He was bound hand and foot, and so tightly that he could scarcely move a muscle.

But the tool-box was there. It lay over on one side—quite empty.

Beside it, however, lay two large blankets.

Beside these were eight short, thick bars of pig lead, weighing, Clif estimated, not less than fifty pounds apiece.

Across them, carelessly flung, were several coils of stout, strong rope.

This grewsome combination was a timely and suggestive accompaniment to the sinister faces of the two persons standing beside it.

Clif's vivid imagination took fire in an instant.

Clif's nerves jumped with a thrill of the most vivid description, as one of the grim twain spoke.

It was Darchie, and he said:

"Now to load the box, tie on the weights, and sink the outfit!"

CHAPTER VI.

"TO FATHOMLESS DEPTHS."

Load up the box! tie on the weights! sink the outfit! Clif Faraday might well experience a curdling shock!

He made a rapid mental guess as to what had occurred after that big boulder had downed him.

He had been dumped into the box and removed to this place—near at hand.

He had been taken out of it, bound, and now——
What next?

Clif knew that Darchie was a pretty desperate fellow, but his words fairly appalled him.

The other, his companion, never blinked an eyelash.

Coolly, as if he was folding up a napkin, he took a handkerchief from his pocket and began doubling it carefully lengthwise, while he said:

"Quite so—quick action, or nothing."

"That goes, Bell!" nodded Darchie, producing a cigarette, lighting it, and puffing.

"Then you go."

"It's a big break."

"But it runs like grease if we don't slip a cog—come, hustle!"

Immediately Darchie started for the doorway, briskly clearing it, as if bound on a hurried jaunt.

The man he had called "Bell" thrust his hands into his pockets and whistled softly to himself.

Meantime he gazed reflectively and speculatively at the box, at the weights, at the blankets, at the ropes.

"Guess that is all right," Clif heard him mutter. "I'll get things fixed."

The cold chills ran up and down Clif's spine. The man picked up the lantern, holding in his other hand the folded handkerchief.

"Coming for me!" theorized Clif.

Straight into the stall the fellow strode, set down the lantern, knelt by Clif's side. —

"Hello!" he started, as the glare showed his captive with eyes wide open.

"My man——" began Clif.

"Shut up!"

"Not till I tell you——"

"Or I'll rap you! - Not got enough yet? Haven't made us sufficient trouble as it is? There! Chatter—if you can!"

Before Clif could utter another word the man had succeeded in the purpose he had come for.

"Snug and tidy," chuckled the fellow, getting up and moving away. "Be thankful it isn't worse."

Worse! Clif was frenzied at the outfit and the outlook.

It was easy to read between the lines. Bound and gagged, he was to be next deposited in the box, ready for a plunge to the deep bottom of the river!

Bell now righted the box. He jerked one of the

blankets unrolled. Out came a hammer and a small paper package.

Undoing this latter, the contents were revealed—a dozen or more heavy steel staples.

Eight of these he proceeded to drive into different parts of the box.

Then he tied as many pieces of rope, and then in turn to their ends carefully secured the pigs of lead.

His next move was a puzzler to Clif—he took one of the blankets over to the adjoining stall and rolled it full of hay.

Bringing it back to the box, he wrapped about this bundle the other blanket, and Clif could not help but compare its size and general appearance to a wadded-up human form.

Clif's guesses took a new turn instantly. What did this queer maneuver mean?

Before he could think it out fully, there was a noise as of some one approaching.

The next instant four persons filled the doorway.

Darchie led the group. Behind him came Chawnccey De Lawncey, McFatricks and Kafoozelum.

Chawnccey was haggard, his companions looked frightened, breathless, and they halted at a distance, and shivered as if thrilled, as the man on the box nodded in a grim, solemn way, completely at variance with his recent brisk animation of manner.

"Tell them!" suggested Darchie.

"Come nearer," directed Bell, sternly. "You three had your share in the business—don't flunk at facing the consequences."

"Say!" chattered Chawnccey—"I've got nerves, you know!"

"No good around here. If you can't curb them, go back home and wait for the police."

"Oh! dear me—oh! dear me," gasped Chawnccey, and he staggered back, and Clif thought he was going to faint.

"No squeamishness!" grated Bell, harshly. "It's

sink or swim, liberty or the gallows, for the five of us!"

"And that's a true word!" nodded Darchie, vehemently.

"It can't be as you say!" fluttered Chawncey. "Faraday, who they brag played tenpins with lighted bombs in Cuba! Faraday, who fell four stories and landed on his feet! Faraday, who could maul a giant and roll a hill on a barrel! Faraday——"

"Met his Waterloo at last!" roughly interrupted Bell. "He's in there."

"Oh, my!" shivered Chawncey, jumping back with a horrified stare at the box.

"Want to see him?" demanded Bell.

"No. Never! It's—it's—terrible!"

"There he is."

Bell held back the cover. Chawncey hid his face in his hands, Kafoozelum turned his back, McFatrick craned his neck, but, getting the shivers, shrank back again.

"There he is," proclaimed Bell, dropping the cover—"as Darchie knows, as we all know, laid out by a stone."

"Thrown accidentally!" gasped Chawncey.

"Not a bit of it—pure malice and aforethought the law would say," insisted Bell. "What's the use hemming and hawing! Five of us had a hand in settling Faraday—we'd hang, five in a row, if it was ever known."

"I—I'd turn State's evidence!" cried Chawncey.

"No good. We could swear that the jagged rock you hurled struck Faraday right on the temple. Of course we didn't mean to end him——"

"But he's ended," put in Darchie.

"So we've to consider what's best to do. Sink Faraday! say I—sink him to fathomless depths, where he'll never be found!"

"It's the only way," assented Darchie.

"Do you agree to it?" pressed Bell, facing the

awed, shrinking trio. "The arrangements are made, and it's hustle and hurry, or haggle and hang!"

"Of course it is—there's nothing else to do," said Darchie. "We're all in an awful muddle, and you must help us out of it."

"Ain't I trying?" demanded Bell. "I want no bucking and rowing further along the line, though. Help here, now—get this off our hands. Goodness knows there's enough to consider facing us afterwards!"

"What's facing us?" ventured Chawncey, looking more scared than ever.

"Well, if you three should stay behind and the box came to the surface——"

"We're not going to stay behind!" broke in Mc-Fatrick. "Do you take us for idiots? No, sir! Darchie says you agree to take care of us if we cut stick. Not sorry to leave the old barracks, anyhow!"

"No, I reckon the four of us have about run our course," observed Darchie. "You know what I told you—the fix of my friend, Mr. Bell, here—the famous chance for obscurity if we're suspected, the certain opportunity of having some kind of a life where we can call our souls our own."

"Only—orders obeyed!" observed Bell, with a sly wink to Darchie.

"I've told them."

"And they agree?"

"Fully."

"Then this first!"

Clif could only see so far. It was far enough to take in a great commotion about the box as it was weighted and tied.

Then, lugging at it, all hands departed. In the distance there was a splash.

A full hour went by, during which Clif was left the sole, silent occupant of the old barn.

He had such a spell of vivid, active thinking as he had rarely indulged in.

Clif decided that Bell was some hard character who had a hold on Darchie, or to whom the latter drifted, as naturally would one sinister spirit to the companionship of another.

He and Chawncey's crowd were booked for punishment, soon as the academy superintendent returned.

The two knaves, old and young, had thoroughly convinced Chawncey and his friends that a stray rock blow had given the champion cadet his quietus.

Where they were heading for Clif had not got an inkling, but he understood that Bell planned to get a start before the captive was discovered and set free.

Clif wondered when that would be. His chances of helping himself were distinctly remote.

Finally Bell re-entered the place, followed by Darchie.

Evidently they had just met, for the former questioned, eager and hurried.

"Well, what news?"

"All arranged."

"As you planned?"

"To the biggest capital letter T ever was!"

"Got the book?"

"Would I leave it behind!"

"Got the case?"

"Would I sleep nights if I missed! Mistake—De Lawncey got both."

"But he don't know about the case——"

"I bamboozled him there. And it puts them in so deep they've got to go with us now. I'm content to leave he high-jinks, stuck-up old hulks of a place, now I've settled Faraday's score and some others, and got three fellows to rough it with me!" declared Darchie, with a mingled exultation and venom Clif could not fully analyze.

"You'll find me a good friend to tie to," observed Bell.

"We intend to tie to you!"

"That's right."

"We've got nothing else to tie to, have we?"

"Correct, again. Now, then, about yonder fellow?"

Darchie's sprawling fists worked restlessly.

"I'd like to pound him at my leisure as a parting gift!" he hissed.

"Hasn't he had about enough?"

"He will think he has, when he comes to realize that he has finally run up against a fellow too smart to down!"

"Meaning yourself?"

"You bet, myself!" vaunted Darchie. "I'll be a thorn in Faraday's side for many a long day to come!"

"You know he can't stay here forever?"

"Of course—likely to get on his pegs by to-morrow."

"Then it's a chase, you also know."

"Cert. We guessed all that out."

"And you provided against his steering on our trail?"

"Have I? Come up to where the others are waiting and see!" boasted Darchie, triumphantly.

CHAPTER VII.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS.

Clif lay counting the seconds—it was torture for that restless, indomitable spirit to remain tamely dormant while enemies were scoring the points.

The malevolent Darchie had boasted of being "the one" to completely baffle and defeat the academy hero, and Clif would not confess to this—yet.

Chawncey De Lawncey and his crowd were not the best fellows in the world, but they belonged to Clif's class, and were being seriously led astray.

From what Clif had overheard, they had been duped into carrying away some property belonging to others—he knew not who.

Besides a certain "case," a "book" likewise figured in the matter—a book, it would appear from the connection of Darchies' disconnected discourse that "paid off" Faraday and some others.

Besides all this, Clif was so indignant at the base-souled Bell, that had he alone been concerned in the case, he could not have rested until he had put the scoundrel where he evidently belonged—in the penitentiary.

Thinking of all this, Clif felt he would mind no obstacles, not even Darchie's boasted plan for throwing him off the trail, if he only had his liberty.

But freedom Clif could in nowise secure through his own efforts—that was a settled fact.

So Clif counted the seconds to keep from going wild entirely, and reckoned them into minutes, and these into hours.

It must have been after midnight when an encouraging echo made Clif thrill.

Voices dull and sleepy hovered. They passed along the side of the barn.

Clif's heart sank. The speakers had moved on. No! Some one entered the dark, silent structure.

"Two!" muttered Clif, and strained his ears mightily.

"Dis'll do!"

"Dis'll have to do, won't it?" demanded a sour retort.

"I sees no oder joint wid an open inwite."

"Den bunk. Cheese de patter!"

"Why! wots' de matter wid you?"

"Matter! De gang goes and leaves us in' de lurch takin' all de 'availables, don't dey? If youse had proper pride you'd have hurt feelin's!"

"Mebbe dey was jugged?"

"Nit—its' a cold, bare desertion. Lemme sleep."

Clif, helpless, took hope—Clif, the fastidious, never welcomed natty fellow-cadet so longingly as did he his odd bedfellows.

One of them plunged into the hay of the next stall without ado—the other Clif heard land on the straw at his side with a great, sleepy yawn of luxury.

So securely had Clif been tied that he could not turn, even move—so tightly did the handkerchief gag cross his lips and wad down his tongue, that he could not utter a coherent lisp.

The tramp was not six inches away from Clif—his coat even brushed Clif's hands, but Clif's back was to him.

The fellow went almost immediately to sleep, and two sets of snores soon filled the place with dissonance.

It must have been half an hour later when Clif's bedfellow began to rustle.

He mumbled uneasily. Then he flopped over, then back again, and his head bumped up against Clif.

It was where the naval cadet's hands outspread, where the wrists were tied round and round with stout, cutting fishcord.

Clif's heart gave a jump, and Clif's tact and power came into requisition like a piece of deft machinery given the chance to work on something.

His fingers were free, and thrilling to the touch of a great shock of hair muffling his hands like the thickest fur, Clif twined those nimble fingers into the mop as if he was holding on to diamonds!

The somnolent tramp never heeded the grip. A moment later, however, he started another uneasy turn-over.

"Wow!" he screamed.

"Hey!" roused up the occupant of the next stall.

"Help! murder—Brownsey, I'm—kilt!"

"Easy—it's a horse on you."

"It's no nightmare. It's—rats! It's——"

"Den youse got 'em!"

"It's—Brownsey! I'm all of a-tremble. Brownsey,

dis way, fur de love of friendship—it's a human hand!"

"Hey!"

"Dats' wot—two of 'em! Wow! I'm glued help!"

Clif had held on. The tramp, after the first violent wrench to his frowsy locks, had felt up—all over Clif's hands his fingers roved and fell a-trembling.

So deathlike still was the form in contact, that the tramp, not understanding its rigidity, was well-nigh paralyzed with terror.

"Now den, show up!" challenged his companion, groping his way in the darkness into the "double straw bed."

"Fe-ee-el!" chattered the other.

"Why! it's a man."

"Hey! he's tied up like a mummy."

"Say! we'se struck a mystery!"

"Its—it isn't no dead man?"

"Do dead people grip? Lemme see. Hokey-pokey, now—look at dose!"

The exploring tramp flared a match. He seemed to take in the situation at once. The handkerchief was his first point of attack.

Clif blurted a rapid explanation, thanks, urgency in unwinding feet and hands.

In silent wonder the two tramps followed him outside. The night light helped him select the proper coins from his soggy pocket book.

"Dis is like fairyland!" grinned the fellow who had undergone the hair-pulling.

Clif let money do the talking—he dove straightway from the spot, making out his environment, trying to think out the presumable route of the crowd he was after—and after them now, hot and heavy!

It was a pretty important matter for him to swing alone—the academy officers should certainly be apprized of its details.

Clif got to the main traveled road. He had not a

clew as to direction or destination in reference to the absconding naval cadets and their rascally guide.

"It's the academy first for explanations, for a new equipment," decided Clif, with a dubious glance at his sorry attire.

Clif had proceeded down the road less than a quarter of a mile when, just past a turn, he bolted about.

"Look out!" howled a sharp voice.

A whizz and a zip accompanied the hail.

Clif dodged aside just in time to evade contact with a crouching form on a bicycle.

The wheel wobbled this way, wobbled that—its rider let out a second yell as he essayed to jump from it.

The wheel curved gracefully into a hedge and stuck there.

Its rider rose, rounded, came down in the dust and with a violent "chug."

"Oh, Faraday!" followed a groan.

"Hello! who is that?" hailed Clif, peering sharply and approaching the half-recumbent form.

"Me. Bill Brooks."

CHAPTER VIII.

ON THE WHEEL.

Clif's mind was weighted with serious responsibilities, but he had to pause.

Bill Brooks had been a rare friend to Clif in a recent episode where courage and co-operation meant something.

Clif had saved Bill from a terrific fall from a painter's scaffold—Bill had remembered, and had helped Clif rescue an academy visitor from a band of criminals only a week before.

To pass by this plain, common, but thoroughly sterling friend in a hurry, therefore, would have hurt his feelings immensely, and Clif was always careful to act the perfect gentleman.

To help smiling at the grotesque figure Bill cut was impossible.

"Yes, it's me!" nodded Bill, getting up, limping,

"Bill Brooks. Banged up, biffled, brusy, bungled Bill, middle names just now!"

"Riding the bicycle, eh?" suggested Clif.

"Don't you see I ain't?" demanded Bill—"oh, no, just wrestling with it, so far."

"But what in the world are you doing out at this hour of the night?"

"That's just it!" bobbed Bill, with force—"so as no one will see me."

"Ah!"

"Although I came out about eleven, first, I sneaked it through the woods clean up beyond Waterville. I scouted till I knew there was no one in sight or hearing. Then I let 'er go!"

"You were coming pretty fast."

"Yes, and if it hadn't been for the curve and seeing some one in my way, I'd have made home without a tumble. Just the same way back near Waterville."

"How was that?"

"Got the hang of the machine—once started, mind you—like an expert."

"Good!"

"Back there I was just a spinning, when, just as here, rounding a turn I was so flustered at running into four cadets and a man——"

"Bill!"

Clif's bumpkin friend gave a wild stare and a startled cry.

Clif had interrupted, pounced upon, grabbed him so suddenly that he did not know what to make of it.

"You startled me," explained Clif, still looking startled, too—"Bill, quick! you saw four cadets?"

"Why, yes——"

"And a man?"

"As I told you."

"What kind of a man?"

"Had on a big hat tied down over his eyes with a handkerchief, covering his face as if he had a gum-bile."

"Disguised!" muttered Clif. "And the cadets?" he rapidly interrogated aloud.

"Four."

"Who?"

"Dunno."

"Do you know Darchie?"

"I don't."

"But you know Chawncey De Lawncey?"

Bill Brooks "expanded."

"Say!" he quizzed with a chuckle—"the fellow too mean dirt for you to trounce when he sneered at you, and that I gave a whack one day out of fond remembrance. Yes, I sort of know him!"

"Was he one of the four?"

"Can't say."

"Why——"

"Let me explain," said Bill, his face falling again. "I whizzed into them, they opened. I went on—and up, and then down. I saw forty cadets and eight men dizzying around me for about six minutes! When I realized things and a big knob on my head they were gone."

Clif's breath was coming rapidly. He did not think of academy advice or another suit just now.

Bill had run across four cadets and a man—the exact number!

Now, as he noted how Clif was roused up he got excited himself.

"Thought it was strange—so far away from the academy, so late at night, and headed still further away, and queerly."

"How, Bill?" pressed Clif.

"Into the woods where they did so much log sawing last year."

"The road cutting off this side of Waterville?"

"You've just got it."

"Thanks, Bill—you have given me some valuable information."

Clif was for bolting off peremptorily. He forgot distance and weariness in the ardor of a clear conviction of duty.

"Hold on, now!" cried Bill.

Clif looked questioning.

"Another racket?"

"You mean trouble and tricks—yes, Bill."

"You let me help you!"

"Later, if I need you," promised Clif, and made another start.

"Hold on, again!" came a second detaining hail.

"What is it?—don't waste time!"

"You're going to Waterville?"

"I must, and at once."

"Afoot? No, sir-ree! Do you—huh! needn't ask—you can do anything! There's a bicycle. Why not?"

Why not, indeed! And into the saddle, and with a grateful, cheery wave of his hand, Clif was pedalling back the way he had come, one minute later.

He could not help but congratulate himself on his rare good fortune in chancing upon Bill—it seemed like an encouraging award of fate itself.

He met not a soul the entire length of his long spin.

As he neared Waterville he located the road that led off into the woods.

For a mile he could follow it. Then he had to dismount and lead his bicycle.

There were paths in every direction. He tried to map out the plans and probable destination of the people he was pursuing.

They had made a shrewd move in turning into this wilderness for it stretched to the West almost inter-

minably and a person could travel for miles without meeting a human being.

Clif calculated that the refugees would halt before morning. Having lost themselves, they would not feel that they had any reason to fear being overtaken.

Pushing his bicycle by his side, Clif followed the course of the stream, crossing the timber, deeming that a likely guide for the fugitives as well.

He had gone some three miles when he halted—a taint of tobacco smoke pervaded the air.

Clif sniffed sharply, got direction bearing, and started up a still hunt.

He set his bicycle against a tree on the bank. Back from the shore were frequent clumps of bushes, and Clif cautiously stole from one to another, peering now, for the tobacco taint had evaporated.

Suddenly he saw a form—his pulses stirred—a form in cadet uniform.

Was he seen as well? It seemed so, for the figure sprang away—disappeared.

It seemed to sink into the ground where there was a depression.

Clif ran fast on the trail, to come to the edge of a great saw-dust pit.

“Where?” he ardently whispered to himself, stationed there—“and who?”

Early dawn was breaking, and he peered everywhere about.

The spot had been recently cleared of timber, and he could not get away from the fact that the vanishing figure had been swallowed up right at the edge of the saw-dust pit.

Peering down into it, he imagined he traced a movement. Clif’s suspicions took fire. He jumped down.

“Ouch!” howled a stentorian voice.

Upon its owner’s foot Clif had landed.

There the fugitive had burrowed, and sawdust

raining from head and shoulders he came to a half-sitting posture.

Clif, leaning over to grab promptly, drew back immensely startled and disappointed.

"Not a cadet!" he ejaculated.

"Partner," jeered the wearer of the cadet uniform, rubbing his eyes clear—"not on yer life!"

Clif stood staring at the fellow—a man of forty with the hair, face and bearing of the typical "hobo."

He was incensed, nettled, half-enlightened, and he demanded, sternly:

"Where did you get that uniform?"

"Oh!" retorted the man, straightening up importantly, "I didn't steal it."

"Never mind that—you answer my question."

"Well, it was given to me."

"Who by?"

"Want to know bad?"

"And at once!"

"All right—you come with me."

Clif was perfectly fearless. He fancied he began to see the light.

As the man led him a little distance back to where he had left his bicycle and rounded the open front of a sort of a three-sided shed formed of logs, Clif experienced complete illumination.

There were three other fellows, and all wearing cadet uniforms.

A fourth lay asleep, and Clif instantly recognized him as the bundled-up fellow Bill Brooks had described.

But it was not Bell, and the deepest disappointment and chagrin stole over Clif's heart.

"You needn't explain," he said, facing the grinning coterie—"some one hired you to trade clothing and come this way."

"Mister, you have just struck it!" bobbed one of

the men, bluntly and boldly, "and that's all we know, and what are you going to do about it?"

Clif realized that he had fallen into the trap set for him by Darchie—the one he had so openly boasted about.

The men professed the densest ignorance as to the identity of their employer, his plans, or his whereabouts, and Clif was soon once more on his wheel bound homewards.

"Those men are undoubtedly the crowd whose desertion the two tramps in the barn were mourning," he calculated. "Darchie and his associates of course took an exactly opposite direction. Broad daylight? Well, they have a good nine hours' start of me, but I shall not despair."

Clif felt dissatisfied with the way things had turned out, but he was tireless.

He planned what he would do, and once his mind was made up he proceeded in accordance with his intentions.

The commandant was absent from the academy—Clif felt that he was justified in adopting an independent course.

He hoped to head off the fugitives before Chawncey De Lawncey and his two comrades had irrevocably committed themselves to the guardianship of persons who could only lead them into crime and disgrace.

If he could accomplish this and induce them to return, their escapade in its true merits might yet be mercifully shielded.

Clif determined to stop at the home of Bill Brooks, from whom he had secured the bicycle.

To avoid difficult explanation at the academy, he believed that it would be best to get his breakfast at the Brooks' home, where he would be gladly welcomed.

"I will send Bill with a note to Vic, and have him qualify the matter of my absence," soliloquized Cliff

and just near to his point of destination he looked around to trace the sharp, cheery clatter of a horse's ringing hoofs.

Instantly the naval cadet's face broke into a glad, hearty smile as he recognized the fair horse-woman.

It was Bessie Stuart, and as Bessie Stuart was Clif's model of maidenly perfection, the meeting under the romantic auspices of the early morning hour was mutually delightful.

Bessie was out "taking a brief run before breakfast."

She could not help but notice Clif's disordered attire, and traced in Clif's anxious face something uncommon.

Then the idea occurred to Clif to make Bessie his messenger to his chum and fellow-cadet.

Perhaps the eager interest of the lovely girl who had shared more than one thrilling adventure with Clif in Cuba inspired the confiding cadet to tell more than he intended.

Perhaps Bessie's coaxing, charming way was irresistibly attractive.

At all events, when she waved her loyal knight-errant a smiling adieu, a certain serious expression behind the smile told that Bessie was thinking, and thinking deeply, of all that Clif Faraday had told her.

CHAPTER IX.

AN INTENSE MOMENT.

"It's her horse!"

"Then—where is she?"

"Faraday—I'm scared!"

Short, sharp, impressive, the brief colloquy sounded out.

It was afternoon—twenty-four hours since the beginning of the chain of strange and stirring occurrences that had led Clif Faraday to take a temporary

brief, unauthorized leave of absence from Annapolis naval academy.

With Clif was Bill Brooks, and both had just passed the outskirts of a little village, the tenth or twelfth they had visited since morning.

For Clif was tireless, persistent, confident in his ability to accomplish the task he had resolutely set for himself.

Clif had impressed Bill's bicycle into continued use, and after a hearty breakfast and a bare hour's rest, feeling immensely recuperated. Clif had set about finding the broken trail of Darchie and his fellows.

Bill had tendered his co-operation, and Clif had found a way to employ him.

Everything depended on getting a trace of the refugees before they had proceeded far—of learning the direction in which they had gone.

So, while Clif made the wheel spin over the smooth country roads, describing marvelous swift circuits in an incredibly brief space of time. Bill, in the old family gig, more leisurely assumed the task of investigating various nooks and corners of the county that would be out of Clif's scurrying range.

Somewhat disheartened, and according to a provisional agreement, Clif and Bill had met a short distance from the spot where they now were.

Neither had anything to report of the slightest moment, and Bill looked as if he was some guilty criminal as he confessed his own share of failure.

It was while they were discussing a new plan of procedure that a startling ejaculation broke from Clif's lips.

Across the railroad tracks, at the road two hundred yards farther away from the village, there suddenly dashed a horse.

Bill had startled Clif just previous by asserting that twice during the day he had seen Bessie Stuart on horseback.

Bill's first words announced that he recognized the runaway steed—a single glance at the knot of ribbons at the bridle and Clif thrilled with conviction and alarm.

Bessie had been his messenger to Vic Rollins, and now—she had been striving to aid him without making him aware of her co-operation.

"Running away!" exclaimed Bill.

"And Bessie herself—where is she?" cried Clif, his heart taking instant alarm.

Clif sprang to his bicycle, Bill to his gig.

"The horse!" breathed Clif, hurriedly.

"Overtake?"

"If you can."

"I will!"

Clif thought only of Bessie. He tried to make himself believe as he tore around the grove of trees that shut the road beyond out of view, that the horse, left standing, had started up, riderless.

Bessie was a superb horsewoman, and he doubted if she would allow her accustomed steed to unseat her.

Clif heard a clatter and half turned—Bill Brooks had disappeared.

"The daring fellow," uttered Clif, fervidly, guessing what his dauntless companion had done—cut down the rail tracks so as not to lose time rounding the grove.

A scream startled Clif, as he circled into view of the road ahead.

In the middle of the highway down which the horse had just scudded across the railroad tracks, stood Bessie Stuart.

Her riding skirt was covered with dust as if she had just fallen.

Her riding whip she had retained, however, and with this she was cutting out at a squat, dark-featured fellow, wearing a handkerchief for a turban and little round gold rings in his ears.

The scream had not proceeded from Bessie's lips, however, and Clif, tracing its source, fancied he understood what had happened.

A little child—a girl—was speeding away in flight in the same direction the runaway horse had taken.

Her terror was caused by the appearance of a swarthy fellow, and brave, daring Bessie was covering her flight.

The man tried to seize her, to dart past her, only to receive a blinding cut directly across the face.

He grappled at her as Clif set up a shout. Bessie tore herself loose almost instantly.

A frightened scream from the child had alarmed her, and Clif saw her lovely face turn white and frantic as she disregarded the man entirely.

"A locomotive!" breathed Clif, and his heart seemed to cease its throbbings.

He was spurting as he came forward, but Bessie fairly flew over the ground.

The little child had reached the tracks. There she had either stumbled or the appearance of an approaching locomotive had paralyzed her with terror.

The great monster of speed and destruction glided into view.

The engineer alone was in the cab. Clif saw him look out of the window, heard him give a shout as he caught sight of the child.

His hand shot to a lever as if to stop the engine, and Clif gave a leap as if hopeful at the slowing up rate of progress that he could outdistance the locomotive and reach and rescue the prostrate child.

Somehow the engineer's clutch at the lever was false—somehow, too, he landed foul.

He fell headlong, and the locomotive moved on with undiminished speed.

"Bessie!" shouted Clif, his heart in his throat.

"Saved!" he cried, all a-tremble.

Bessie had seized the child barely in time, dragged

it back in her arms, and, fairly in the centre of the tracks, sprang to the cowcatcher.

The little one seemed to have fainted, and in the fling to safety its foot had got caught between two of the lanting bars of the cowcatcher.

Then on passed the locomotive, and rescued and rescuer went beyond Clif's range of vision.

He had taken in every detail of what had happened—he understood the situation as it had now developed:

Bessie on the cowcatcher of a runaway engine, held there by the duty of still further guarding the senseless, foot-imprisoned child—not daring to risk a slip by stirring from her perilous pose!

Up to the rails, a curve down them, over the ties, Clif directed his wheel.

How long could he keep up the joggling, jolting pace—could he hope to overtake the speeding miracle of steam?

His—pop!

Clif had run five hundred yards, when a tie sliver struck his front tire like a pin puncturing a balloon.

He took a header, rolled over, came up—the bicycle a practical wreck, himself bruised and bleeding from a scraping roll over the hard, jagged stone ballast.

Then he looked ahead eagerly, fearingly.

The engine was speeding along on a slight curve, and he saw the flutter of a light, pretty dress over the edge of the cowcatcher.

The road had split—one branch diverging toward the river, the other beginning the sharp ascent of the side of a hill.

There was a switch at the side of the track marking the division of the rails.

Clif thrilled, arose, reeled forward in an excess of suspense and terror.

The level tracks showed, not a hundred feet be-

yond the switch, not only the river, but the bridge swung to let through a barge—an open draw!

Clif was powerless, and his nerves seemed to drop like cut wires as he realized it.

His eyes starting from their sockets, he watched the prospect ahead.

Which course would the runaway locomotive take—for which tracks was the switch set!

CHAPTER X.

THE CORDON OF DEATH.

A shout overhead up the hillside distracted Clif's attention.

It was Bessie Stuart's runaway horse—Clif caught the flaunt of the ribbons at the bridle rein.

It was backing and stamping, but within a limited space, and acted as if caught or tied.

Instantly Clif understood, for the next moment a form came speeding down the sharp incline from the spot.

"Bill Brooks!" breathed Clif, staring.

He must have followed the runaway horse in its course from the main road—must just have secured it.

And now—

A tumbling, whirling heedless lump of doughty, reckless humanity, Bill Brooks aimed for the switch bar—and reached it.

Over swung the tri-colored disc—what change had the intrepid Bill made? The right one?

The locomotive was not yet up to it. Without a wait Bill dashed up the sharp slanting roadway where the rails divided.

"What is he up to?" murmured Clif. "What does he hope to gain? Saved! Blessed Bill! You have turned the engine from the river, whatever may be lurking to face it on that other switch!"

Bill had run perhaps two hundred feet up the slanting roadbed.

Clif saw him pause, leap to the side, spring to a heap of ties, and poise there.

The engine started on its upward, onward rush. Clif fancied that it slowed somewhat as it began to find the up grade difficult.

It neared the spot where Bill posed, came between him and the staring Clif.

"Why, he is gone!" shouted Clif, as the locomotive cleared the momentarily obscured range of sight.

"He is in—the engine cab!"

Clif read the valiant maneuver now. Bill had counted on the relaxed speed of the locomotive to safely and successfully spring into the cab as it passed him.

The engine began to slow up, the wheels ground—Bill had worked the lever, and it came to a full stop.

Clif sped forward as if suddenly given wings.

Around to the cowcatcher, and there was a trembling huskiness in the usually cheery and calm voice of the naval cadet, as he spoke the name of the plucky girl clinging there.

"Bessie!"

Bessie was quite pale, her eyes haunted with the terrific strain to nerves and mind she had undergone.

With one hand she had held the imprisoned child from falling—the other had grasped a bar at the top of the cowcatcher.

She dared not—thus practically helpless, with the engine dashing on—venture a wrench at the imprisoned foot.

Clif managed to release it now. He helped both into the cab.

Bill lifted his hat, proud as a lord, as Bessie pressed his hand and whispered with a radiant smile:

"You hero!"

"It's all right!" murmured the fluttering fellow to Clif, as he reversed the locomotive—"but bet,

when you come to know her interest in that little child, she'll turn out a-shero!"

The engine was stopped as they reached the engineer, limping forward hopeless of overtaking it, yet dazed into action as to some kind of duty.

They all alighted at the roadway, where the child had first fallen between the rails.

"Now, then, Bessie, your appearance here?" began Clif.

"Why, seeking to help you out, Clif," said Bessie. "You know you told me a great deal. My horse needed exercise, and I have been looking around since morning."

"And the man you were horsewhipping?"

Bessie's eyes darted out indignant fire.

"A gipsy—one of a crowd camping somewhere in the woods"

"He has made himself scarce, it seems!"

"He had better!" said Bessie, drawing the little child she had saved nearer to her. "I was resting my horse, when I heard him on the other side of a hedge abusing this little girl. He was threatening to punish her if she did not beg in the village under his direction. She was crying bitterly, and I gathered from her words and the man's admissions that the crowd had recently stolen her from her home in Baltimore. You can imagine that I acted. I got her, and I ran with her, defying the man. He caught up as I was mounting the horse with the little one. We both fell—the horse ran away. Then I covered her retreat, and the rest you know."

"And the little girl?"

"Can you ask me?" demanded Bessie, earnestly. "With broken-hearted parents mourning her loss in their bereft home! The villain—I cut him good, but—he deserves hanging. Why——"

Bessie's fair hand chanced to wander to her snowy throat, where the gipsy had grasped her.

Clif saw her change color and become somewhat

confused. Then her eyes studied the ground all about the spot of her brief struggle with the gipsy.

"What is it?" asked Clif.

"I—I have lost something."

"Why, yes!" read Clif, with a glance at Bessie's neck—"the chain and locket your wear."

"The picture inside," murmured Bessie.

"My picture, Bessie?" inquired Clif.

"Yes, Clif," answered Bessie, frankly. "Tess Herndon gave me the chain, her aunt the locket—of course I prize them highly, but——"

Clif's eyes gave the distance a grim, half-angry look.

"When Bill Brooks returns——" he began.

Bessie placed a gently deterring hand on his arm.

"Do not risk trouble with those people!" she urged.

"Bessie," said Clif, firmly, "I would know the miserable thief again. I will make him disgorge his plunder, if I have to chase your precious chain and locket clear across the State!"

Bessie said nothing more. She knew the masterly nature of her willful champion.

Bill Brooks came into view—gig, runaway horse and all.

"And I will pound enough sense and humility into the black-hearted scoundrel to last him for a full year!" promised the young giant, when he had heard of the locket.

It was arranged what they would do. It was not far from Annapolis.

Clif had about abandoned hope of tracing Darchie and the others single-handed.

Bessie was to ride her horse, Bill took the little girl into his gig.

Both were to go to the academy, tell Vic Rollins and Ridgely where Clif was, and explain enough of the condition of affairs to enable them to secure permission for themselves and four others to assist Cli-

in a systematic search for some clew to the absconded group.

"Meanwhile," said Clif, "I will interest myself in locating the gipsy who took your locket and chain, Bessie. I shall further ascertain where the little child belongs."

Clif had little difficulty in locating the camp Bessie had told him about.

It was quite a large one, and he watched it at a distance for half an hour without observing any one who resembled the gipsy he had seen.

Its members were passing to and fro from the village all the time, and Clif strolled thither, hoping to come across the fellow on the road or in some of its streets.

It was quite dusk when he satisfied himself that the man was not in the village proper.

Vic would be due in another hour—and Clif knew that he must not then lose time in re-engaging his attention solely with the Darchie case.

For the second time, however, he returned to the vicinity of the gipsy camp, and this time he ventured behind the row of tents marking the living quarters.

Clif, in the shadow, glanced between all of these, looking for the man he sought.

He dodged back as he fancied he heard a short, startled ejaculation. Turning, he imagined that a rapid form glided away in the darkness.

Then he saw two vague figures creep up from behind some wagons near to where the swift disappearance had just taken place.

Clif glided forward a step or two, darted between two tents, and nearly stumbled over a ladder lying on the ground.

Beside it were a dozen or more swords—he discerned that they were part of a sword-climber's outfit.

Run through slits in the ladder, they answered for

runs, which some gipsy mountebank ascended with bare feet.

"There he is!" sounded behind him, and Clif snatched up one of the swords.

Then he darted around in front of the tent. Forms near and far were moving about. Clif did not seem to have been noticed as yet, and he slipped into the tent.

Sword in hand, he stood listening intently.

He could hear rustlings and whisperings outside. He decided to step out and boldly face the two men who had followed him.

Perhaps they had taken him for some lawless lurker, and he must explain.

But at that moment a sharp voice spoke:

"All of you form a perfect circle—he must not escape!"

"Bell!" thrilled the marveling Clif.

He had, then, run down the villain quite accidentally!

It was here, with this lawless group of vagabonds, that Bell had sought obscurity and safe guidance to his final point of destination.

He had seen Clif, had recognized him.

"Do as I say!"

Clif braced upright, for an alarming presentiment dizzied his senses momentarily.

No one entered the tent, but on all sides, with perfect uniformity, six sword chips severed each a slit in the canvas.

Six human arms reached through, and each extended a weapon.

And, hemmed in, single-handed, Clif Faraday faced this sinister cordon of death!

CHAPTER XI.

CADETS TO THE RESCUE.

Clash—clang!

Whiz—swoop!

Just one question and a reply mingled with the sinister singing of the brandished blades: "It is the same one I saw on the bicycle?"

Clif divined that this must be the gipsy who had robbed Bessie.

Clif swung in a circle. It might be escape later, but now fight—brisk, effective.

Up—down—there was a howl of pain outside.

Clif cut—with lightning-like rapidity, remembering his best lessons in the fencing-room; Clif struck out with all the vim and deftness of which he was capable.

Twice his head, twice his arm, twice his chest was grazed—but he saw where he aimed, and his adversaries only guessed.

Two swords had been abandoned, one had dropped within the tent—Clif had cleared one wing of the enemy.

Criss-cross he slashed, the canvas fell away, ribboned—a dancing spray of brightness, his sword whistled through the air.

One obtruding form fell back, a second Clif dashed over—a leap across a wagon, and he left only yells of dismay in his wake.

He saw his pursuers deploy so as to hold in view in the bright moonlight any one who might make direct for the village.

Clif had noticed the bay sweep over beyond the hill, where Bessie had rescued the stolen child—he put in that direction.

Half an hour's progress by this remote route and he could strike a safe road leading into the village.

Vic and the others would have arrived, surely, by this time—he could get the townspeople to aid him.

"What is this!"

Clif halted his reflections with the quick query.

On a rock right in his path stood a lantern.

It had colored slides, Clif saw, although it was unlit. Beside it was a telescope.

Clif saw no one in view. What did the queer presentment mean, in that solitary spot?

Clif had thrown away his sword, and had held his pistol in his hand while watchfully progressing.

Curiously he took up the telescope, placing his pistol upon the rock, and casually he swept the bay.

Some one seemed to have lantern and glass ready for an exigency—to discern a signal afloat, and return it?

Turning to replace the telescope, Clif's riveted glance met an astounding spectacle.

Rising up in the air steadily to the cliff, some fifteen feet up, was his revolver.

Some one had lowered a powerful magnet at the end of a string—it had noiselessly glued itself to the weapon. Clif dropped the telescope with a crash.

"Halt, there!" sounded down a gruff voice.

"Yes, if you're wise!"

Clif was defenseless. His eyes scanned the leafy screen above—he made out several glittering weapons.

Something ran down, uncoiled—a rope ladder.

"Come up!" ordered the first voice.

"Suppose I don't?" demanded Clif.

Click—click—click!

Clif shrugged his shoulders—any kind of sinister bay birds was better than the gipsies or Beil!

He coolly, calmly, swung himself up the ladder.

"Knows how to climb, all right!" complimented a voice.

"Ought to—see? he's a cadet."

"Suppose he's the one——"

"Bell spoke of?"

"Ha!"

Clif had recoiled as he discovered that he was walking into a nest of the villain's friends.

The movement betrayed him. He was dragged from the ladder.

There were three men aloft. Two held Clif. The third was rustling in among the shrubbery as if for a lantern, when a whistle cut the air.

On its heels there dashed up a man, breathless, scurrying. He flung down a package.

"The boat?" he gasped.

Clif started—it was Bell.

"Not come."

"I've got to get off!"

"It's due any minute."

"But there's trouble at the camp! What's this—who is this?"

A ray of moonlight struck Clif's face—the villain saw him.

He flung himself toward Clif. With a superhuman effort, Clif wrestled himself free from the others.

"Faraday—you marplot! you meddler!" hissed Bell.

Down both went. At that moment a commotion roused the three gipsy watchers.

"Where are they?" sounded an eager voice.

"Vic!" shouted Clif.

He had fallen under and his head had struck and Bell held him by the throat.

"I'll silence you!" he hissed.

"Cadets to the rescue!" rang back a hail to Clif's sharp, startled cry.

The gipsies, taking to flight, ran right into an approaching group—it was Clif's cadet contingent from the academy.

One person not in uniform sprang past the others.

"Faraday!" he fairly roared—"where are you?"

It was Bill Brooks, and he brandished a club, it looked like.

"Why! you assassin!" shouted Bill.

He struck out at a weapon just drawn by the malignant Bell.

It missed, but his club struck the rock.

Bang!

"Murder! fiends—blinded!"

Bell, with a scream of mortal agony, threw his hands to his eyes.

Bill tore him away from the victim he was strangling.

"Bill—you shot?" choked Clif.

"No; I struck—see?" and he showed the stump of his club, where tatters appended. "A train flag with two track torpedoes on the end—I found it beyond, along the rails. I had to have a weapon, so—one of the torpedoes struck the rock at this fellow's side."

"He is Bell."

"He is? Then I'll take charge of him!"

It was the biggest sensation in its history by many odds, that which the neighboring village enjoyed for the next three hours.

Clif led the descent on the gipsy camp, aided by a score or two of townspeople.

They found Chawncey De Lawncey, McFattrick and Kafoozelum huddled away in an old wagon—Darchie had escaped.

They found in the package Bell had dropped what Chawncey had been deluded into securing at the academy.

The book was the secretary's register of aggregate averages, and without it the end of the term awards would have been in a sad condition, and Clif and other deserving ones left out in the cold, as the malicious Darchie had hoped.

The case was one containing the silver service of the commandant's private household, which Darchie had convinced Chawncey held certain documents covering their past misdemeanors.

Clif recovered Bessie's stolen locket and secured

the name of the people in Baltimore from whom the little child had been stolen.

Bell's hiding tactics had been caused by the fact that he was wanted for a bank burglary at that same city.

His photograph and description had been spread broadcast, and he was anxious to keep very shady till his friends, the gipsies, were located—he intended taking his comrades up among the moonshiners in the North Carolina mountains.

Darchie had met the fellow at a low gambling haunt on the outskirts of Annapolis.

Bessie Stuart made one family rarely happy the next day, when she took the little child whose life she had saved to its former home.

Clif made three awkwardly-scared, half-penitent, dubious-minded cadets half-heartedly grateful by hiding from general public the knowledge of the disgraceful escapade of Chawncey, McPatrick and Kafoozelum.

"Just your way!" commented Vic Rollins, who was on the inside of affairs.

"Give them another show," said Clif. "Isn't it a good way?"

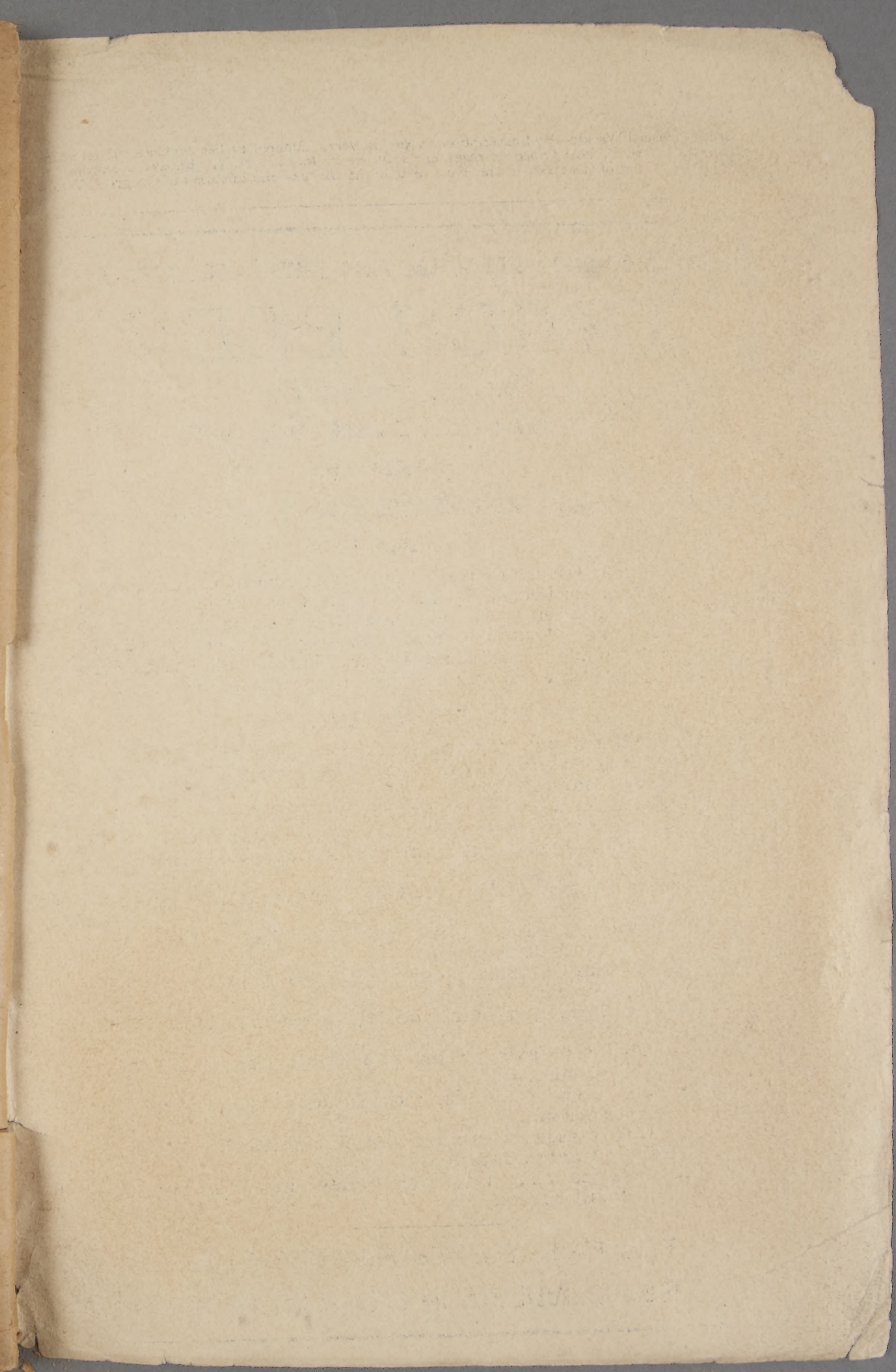
"It's Faraday's way, anyhow!" said Bill Brooks, bluntly. "I'm proud as blazes of him, whatever he says or does, and maybe you call that prejudice, but I notice one thing."

"And what's that?" asked Vic.

"Faraday's way is always the way that wins!"

[THE END.]

The next book will contain "Heroes Three; or, The Naval Academy Mutineer," by Ensign Clarke Fitch, U. S. N.



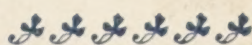
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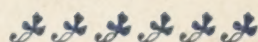
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